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ISOLATED INCIDENT

BY MARTA MURVOSH STAFF WRITER

A recent murder was out of the ordinary for the Kulshan Creek neighborhood

MOUNT VERNON — On a recent day at the Kulshan Creek Neighborhood Resource Station, 7-year-old Lupe Lopez sat at a table while Alex Perez, 17, helped her with her school work.

Homework Club is one of a number of programs offered at the facility to help build a sense of community in the city's largest concentration of Hispanic residents, the Kulshan Creek neighborhood.

Much has happened in recent years to improve the quality of life in the neighborhood and reduce the crime rate — making it slightly lower than the city as a whole.

That's why the recent stabbing death of Ricardo Galena-Mora seemed out of place and too close to home.

"It just happened over there, really close," said Gilberto Barrija, pausing from carving a wooden walking stick and gesturing toward the adjacent apartment complex. Barrija said he would feel more secure if he saw more police patrolling the area.

"There are a lot of kids here," he said.

The killing of Galena-Mora, a 27-year-old who lived in Kulshan Creek, has caused some residents to feel uneasy about their safety. It is just the second homicide in Skagit County this year.

Max Moreno, the leasing agent at Cascade West Apartments, said tenants have told him they will feel safer once police arrest the two suspects, brothers Hector Gerado Cota-Leon and Jesus Arturo Cota-Leon.

"By and large, the greatest concern is, 'Have they been caught?' " Moreno said. "Then they will say, 'It's over.' "

Police say they believe the Cota-Leon brothers have fled the Mount Vernon area, and that the slaying was an isolated incident in a neighborhood that has experienced few violent crimes in the past five years. Investigators are releasing few details about what happened the night Galena-Mora was found bleeding on an upper landing of an apartment building in the 1500 block of North 26th Street.

The prosecutor's office has told a judge that one of the brothers has a history of drug-related arrests, according to a document filed in Skagit County Superior Court.



Mount Vernon police Officer Jon Gerondale watches Alex Perez, 17, tutor 7-year-old Lupe Lopez on Thursday during Homework Club at the Kulshan Creek Neighborhood Resource Station. As the neighborhood resource officer, Gerondale works with residents to develop programs that will reduce crime.

Frank Varga / Skagit Valley Herald

"It wasn't a random act of violence," said Jon Gerondale, the Mount Vernon police officer in charge of the Kulshan Creek Resource Station. "It wasn't a gang issue. The neighborhood is safe."

Centered around North 26th Street and Kulshan Avenue, the neighborhood is the most densely populated in Skagit County.

There are about 2,400 people living within the approximately 90 acres bordered by College Way, LaVenture Road, Kulshan Avenue and the eastern boundary of Skagit Valley Mobile Manor. The area is also home to the county's greatest concentration of Hispanics and many residents in Kulshan Creek speak Spanish. There is also a small Russian immigrant community in the neighborhood.



Gilberto Barrija carves a walking stick, which he jokes he may need when he gets older, as children play in the background Thursday in Mount Vernon's Kulshan Creek neighborhood. Barrija says he has seen crime drop over the 11 years he has lived in Kulshan Creek.

Gerondale is holding a neighborhood meeting at 6 p.m. Saturday in the Kulshan Creek Neighborhood Resource Station to answer residents' questions about what happened and respond to their concerns about neighborhood safety.

Gerondale also sees the meeting as a chance to get more people involved in various programs to build community in hopes of reducing crime.

Programs include a neighborhood patrol where volunteers walk the area at night and call 911 to report any problems.

There also is a neighborhood garden to give residents a place to use their green thumbs. The flowers and vegetables stretch along the neighborhood walking trail, so gardeners can deter vandals and other troublemakers.

Since the neighborhood had not experienced a major violent incident in many years prior to the recent stabbing death, most residents don't feel a sense of urgency to volunteer for crime prevention programs, Gerondale said.

"The way I see it, the only way people get involved is if they have incentive," he said.

Javier Arreola, manager of Cascade West Apartments, said he has explained to families that the murder was drug-related and the people who are suspected of the crime didn't live in the neighborhood.

"I've been working here almost five years, one of our goals is to have a safe neighborhood," Arreola said.

Over the years, the programs offered by police and other groups such as Skagit Literacy have been expanded. Also, the managers of apartment complexes meet monthly to discuss issues that have arisen or plan activities such as basketball tournaments.

"We coordinate with the (Skagit Valley) College for free movies for the neighborhood, rather than having kids running in the street," Arreola said.

The neighborhood, once considered one of the city's most troubled, had a lower crime rate in 2003 than the city as a whole.

The five most frequent reports made to police by Kulshan Creek residents are hang-up calls to 911, noise complaints, suspicious activities, vandalism and noncriminal juvenile problems, according to police statistics.

The rate of violent or life-threatening 911 calls such as those reporting fights, robberies and suicide attempts per capita was well below those reported for the entire city in 2003.

From 2003 to 2004, the numbers of assaults and drug-related incidents in the neighborhood that were reported to police dropped dramatically. Vehicle prowls also were down, even

though they rose citywide.

It's a big change from the mid-1990s, police and neighborhood residents say.

"It was really bad when we got here," said Sonia Barrija, Gilberto's daughter. "Now, it's really calm."

That's not to say there haven't been the occasional problems.

"A lot of vandalism, they break the windows of cars," Gilberto said.

Jay Johnson, a Neighbors on Patrol volunteer, said he's seen an improvement in the five years he's lived in the area. He said the changes happened because apartment managers and residents including himself called 911 and took the time to complete police reports.

"Kids were breaking windows every night," Johnson said. "It's gotten a lot quieter around here."

Police say eliminating broken windows is the key to helping any neighborhood.

That's because officers believe troublemakers see shattered glass and think residents don't care about the area. The hooligans then move in and cause worse problems.

One of the changes in the neighborhood specifically targets abandoned and junk cars.

A pilot city ordinance requires residents to park off the streets each Monday, Gerondale said. Any car remaining is to be towed. In the two months since the ordinance took effect, just five tickets have been issued and two cars have been towed.

The policy ensures junk cars aren't abandoned and allows the city street sweeper to clean the roadway, Gerondale said.

Some of the neighborhood's efforts — such as this summer's street festival — build community as a way to prevent crime. They also make Kulshan a desirable destination.

Still, Gerondale knows high-density neighborhoods always have a few bad apples.

"There is only so much we can do," Gerondale said. "We can't affect their moral character. But we can affect where they commit their crimes."

He hopes that, by continuing to build an environment where residents feel like they are part of a community and are comfortable calling police — to report even the most minor problems — Kulshan Creek will grow past its troubled history.

"It goes back to making it a place where people don't want to commit their crimes," Gerondale said.

On the agenda

What: Neighborhood meeting

When: 6 p.m. Saturday, Nov. 13

Where: Kulshan Creek Neighborhood Resource Station, corner of North 26th Street and Kulshan Avenue

Issue: Crime prevention

More information: Phone the station at 360-848-1331 or police at 360-336-6271.

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